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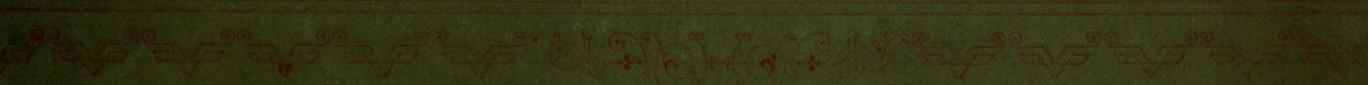
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NOTES

ON THE
BIRD LIFE OF

FORMBY

JOHN WRIGLEY



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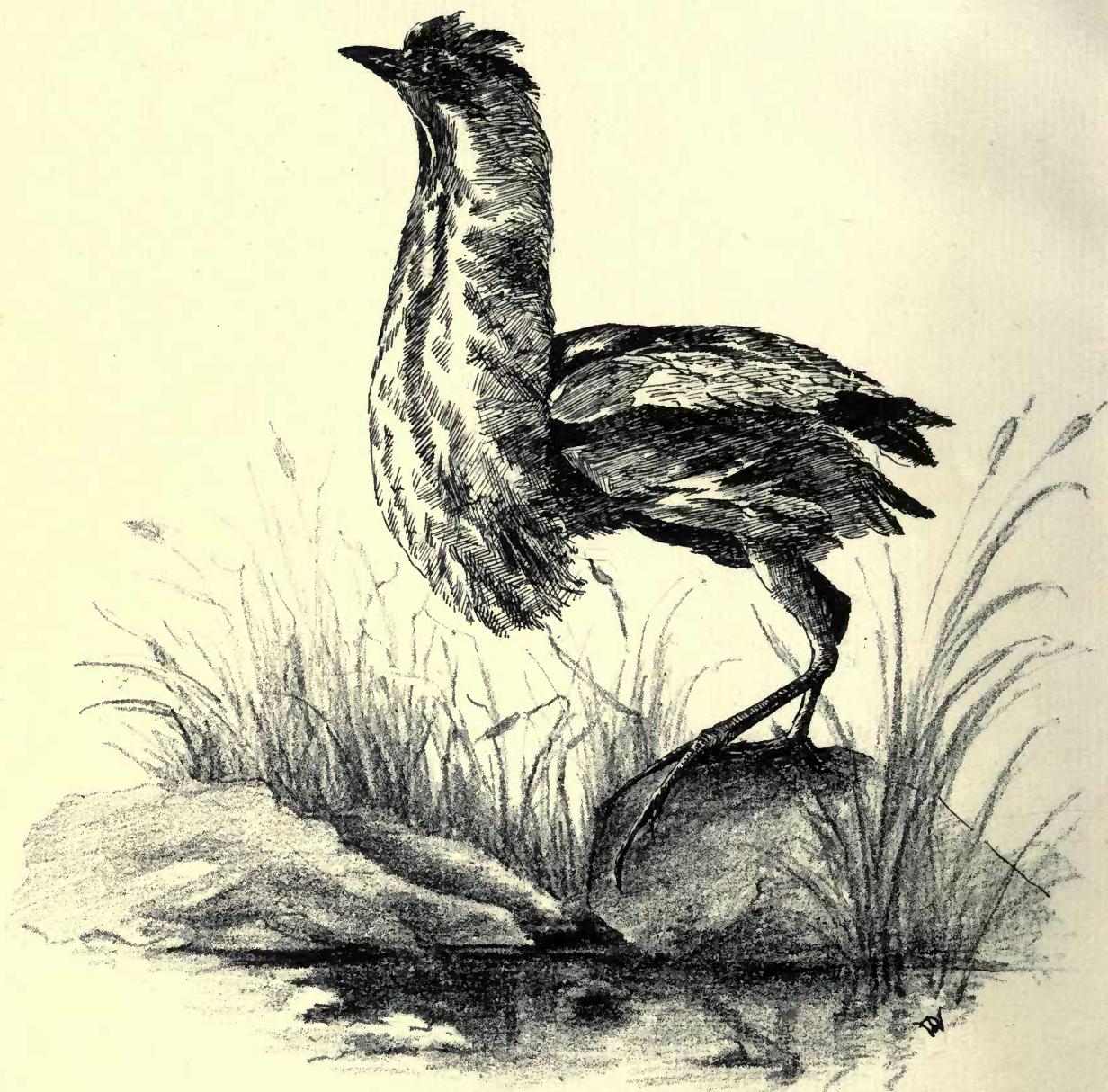


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NOTES ON THE BIRD LIFE
OF FORMBY.





THE BITTERN

NOTES

ON

The Bird Life of Formby

BY

JOHN WRIGLEY

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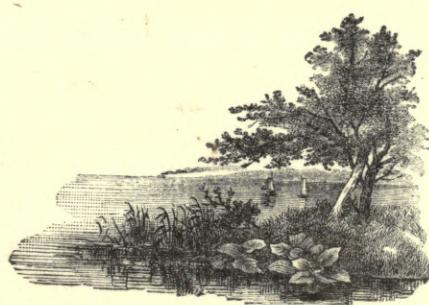
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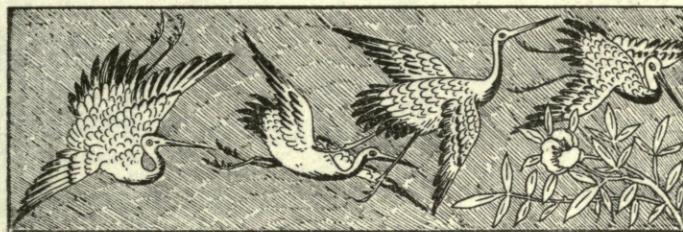


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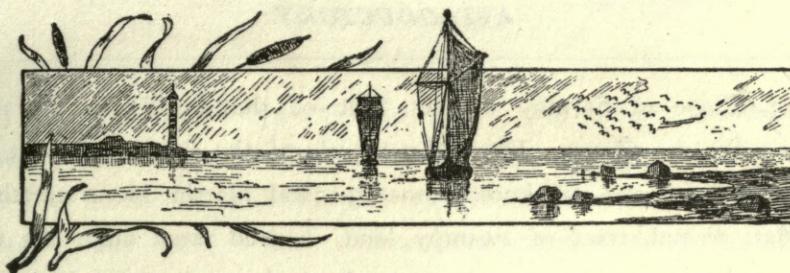
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“EGO.”

IN attempting to collect these few notes on the Bird Life in the neighbourhood of Formby, I wish it to be distinctly understood that it is no skilled naturalist who is bold enough to do so. The writer is merely about as ardent a bird lover as you could find, and one who has always taken a keen interest in the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field, whenever he has had a spare moment from the more serious work of his life.



INTRODUCTORY.

MANY and many a book has been written on the Birds of Great Britain. Several works have been published on the fauna of our own county of Lancashire, and there is a well-known book to be found on the fauna in the neighbourhood of Liverpool.* This little treatise is merely another contribution to the bird lore of this South-western corner of the county, another drop into the mighty ocean of bird literature. Notes are apt to get blown away, and even the most carefully-preserved specimens will not last for ever: nowhere in the whole of the county is the work of the builder, year by year, becoming more apparent, so the writer has thought that a comprehensive list of the identified species which have occurred in the Formby district will not be out of place, if only as a record to be referred to when "there was no more country." Green fields and acres of muddy plough-land are gradually moving further and further away, as what was once the little village of Formby grows and grows into what will soon be a town of considerable importance. Long before the railway was ever run between Liverpool and Southport, the

*Byerly, "Fauna of Liverpool," 1856.

little village of Formby was as "out of the world" as any far away Welsh village. From the mouth of the river Alt close to Hightown to the well-known mosses round Martin Mere stretched a flat, dismal, tract of swampy land, covered very often by the tide, whenever a heavy spate was banked up by the incoming sea water. Ducks, geese and other wild fowl thronged the district. Fishermen lived on the fowl they killed in the winter time. Now all has changed. "Flood gates" by the Alt mouth prevent the sea water coming through, drainage has cleared the mosslands to a certain extent of the water which covered them for several months in the year, and the careful hand of the keeper has cut "rides" in the gorse and heather of the wild New moss. Yet another Liverpool and Southport railway cuts right across what was once a dismal or dreary waste of flat moss, and a high road runs at right angles to the railway, carefully looked after by a considerate County Council. Hundreds of small red brick houses stand glaring at one in regulation rows, where, ten years ago, was a sandy lane with neat, thatched and whitewashed cottages, as picturesque as some of the modern houses are ugly. To a person who has been born and bred in the place the change is rather a sad one, as one notices a familiar green field which has been in its accustomed place as long as we can remember, suddenly become dotted with "heaps" of red bricks; and then, before we have had time to notice it, the green pasture is gone and half-a-dozen trim houses are all ready "To let." So it is bound to go on, until green fields and moss and heather are beyond the boundaries of Formby, birds will be looked upon as chance visitors,

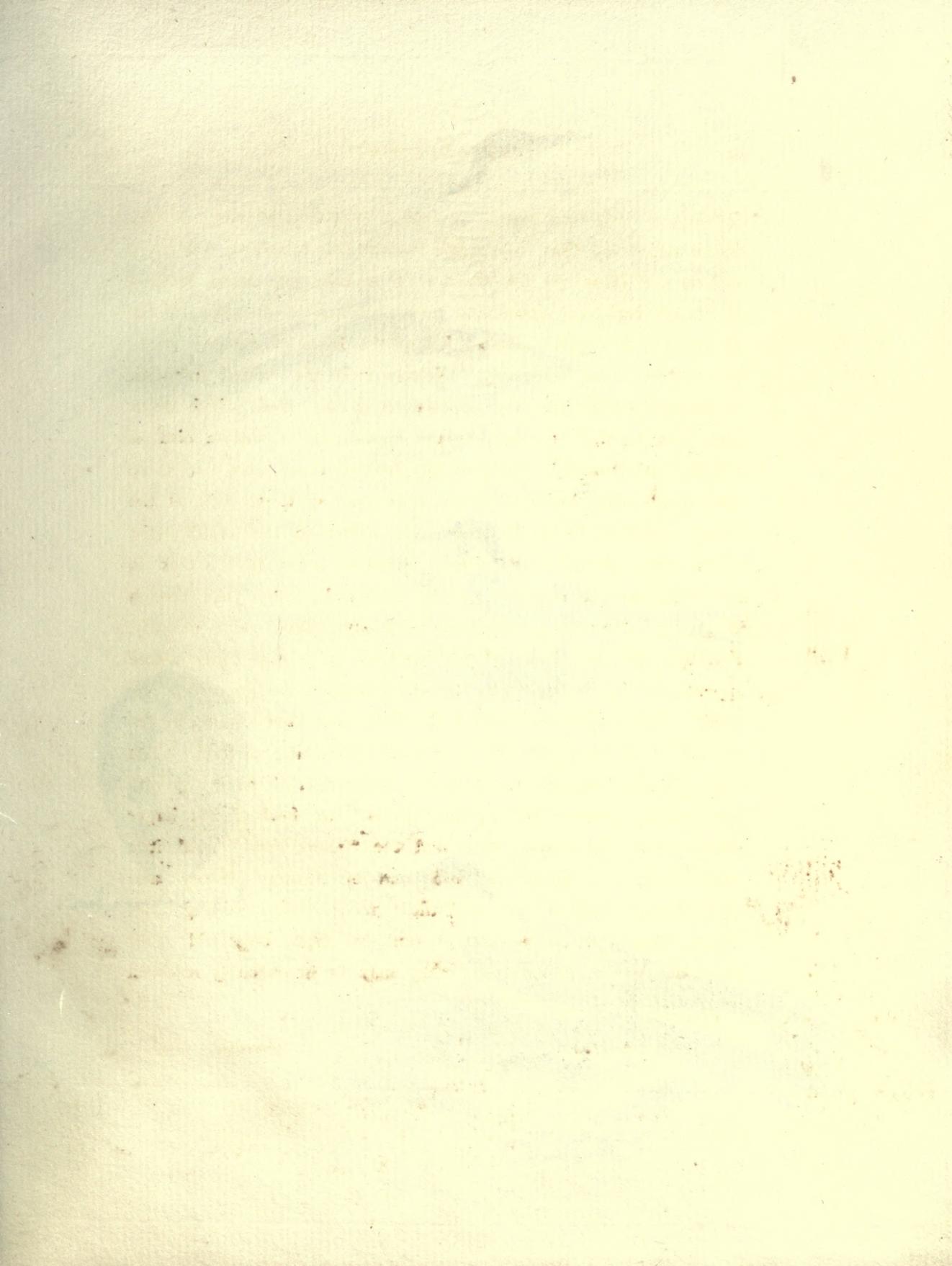
and the account of "what once was" may prove interesting. Thanks to the notes which my father kept almost regularly for the last fifteen years of his life, and which form the bulk of the notes in this book, I have *authenticated* observations of the bird-life of Formby since the year 1870. These notes, collected by one who was recognised as a skilled naturalist, have been very valuable to me, and together with a deal of information which I have gleaned from some of the older residents, such as my old friend Mr. Clarke, have been quite the very best helps I could have received. Also to Mr. Mitchell, the author of "The Birds of Lancashire," I am greatly indebted for the notes on the rarer birds which have occurred in Formby and which I have taken from his work. To many a local farmer and fisherman am I indebted for his kind reminiscences, which on many an occasion he has delighted me with. I only wish I had space for half the amusing anecdotes which I have heard from Formby fishermen. This is a chronicle of birds *known* to have occurred in this district, and also of notes on the birds to be found here; some curious methods of obtaining wild fowl in this part of the country are also explained, and I only hope that when the reader has reached the last page he will not condemn what is merely intended for a rough list of local specimens. Before I close this necessary "preface," I must add that though I have spent many and many a winter evening searching through books bearing on the Natural History of our county, notes from this particular district are very few and far between. But by far the hardest task to me has been the

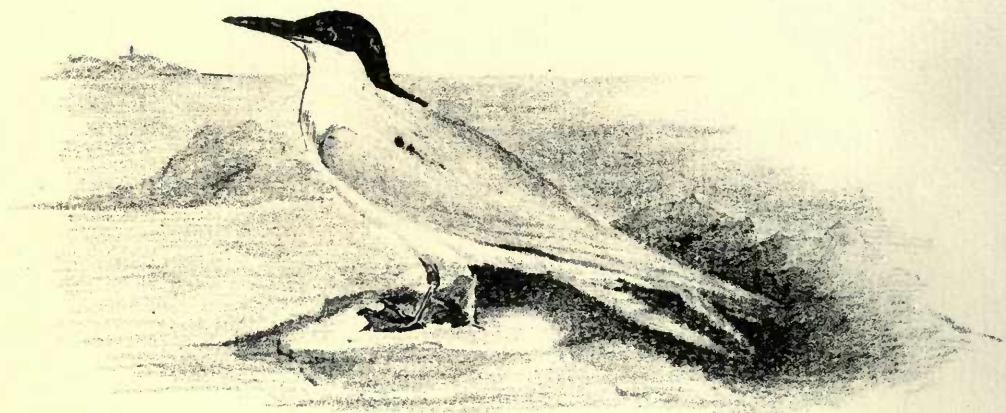
dividing of birds into classes (which is bound to be more or less inaccurate, seeing that several species are found both on the moss and on the shore) in the absence of a more interesting method of chronicling local specimens and my father's numerous notes on them. A regular detailed list of the Birds of Formby would be very far from interesting. Neither is it the writer's intention to attempt to describe the appearance of the birds which occur here; for no man can describe the appearance of such a bird as a cock teal correctly, and probably half of those who read these notes know the looks of most wild fowl quite as well as the writer. Formby is by no means the desert to the ornithologist which many people would think. Rarities occur here, either in the fields, on the shore or on the mosslands, every year, though in greatly diminishing numbers; but still, until quite recently, Formby was the scene of the capture of several birds whose appearances in England may be counted upon the fingers of one hand. The writer has divided the birds into four classes in the absence of a better, or rather, a more interesting, method. The "Moss Birds" may be taken as the frequenters of marshy ground and inland waters; the "Inland Birds" are fowl of the larger inland class; the smaller birds and the "Shore Fowl" need little explanation. To those who are fond of Natural History, and especially of birds, I commend these rough notes, trusting that, should they find many glaring errors in them, they will point them out to me in order that they may be immediately rectified.

FORMBY,

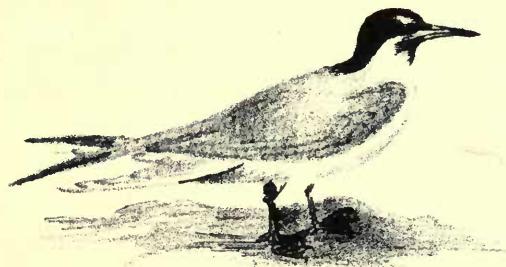
LANCASHIRE.

December, 1892.





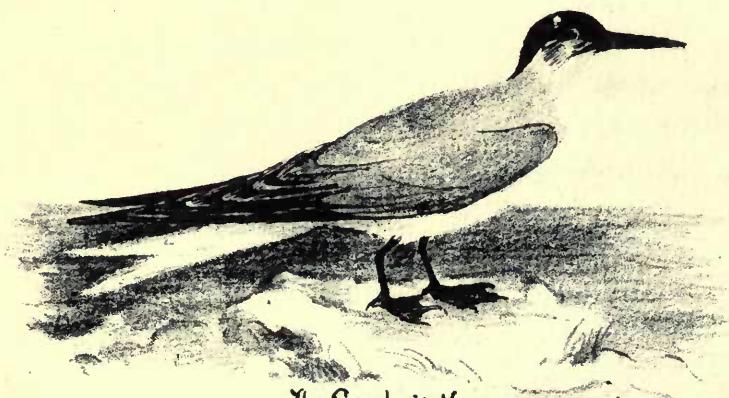
Common Tern.
Sterna hirundo



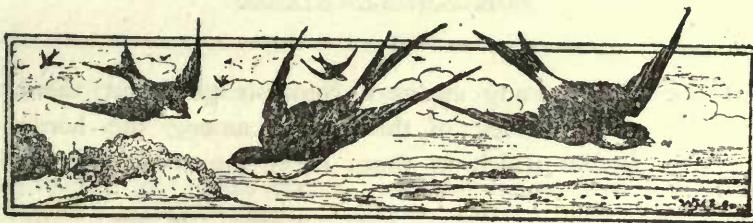
Lesser Tern.
Sterna minuta.



Egg of Common Tern.



The Sandwich Tern.
Sterna sandvicensis



THE SHORE BIRDS.

THE term "Shore Birds" simply means those birds which are found on the shore, or on the sea close to the shore. If I did not explain the above, the reader might wonder at the curious conglomeration of ducks, divers, gulls and waders, or, as the latter are commonly called, "*shore birds*," which come under the above heading.

THE GREATER
BLACK BACKED
GULL.

Larus marinus.

By no means so common as some of the other species of *laridae*, but amongst the huge flocks of these fowl, which may be seen every day on the Formby shore, are always a few "Greater Black Backs," standing out prominently amongst their smaller and less boldly marked brethren.*

*The following is a note of my father's, written several years ago. Referring to a every fine specimen which we have stuffed, he says:—"This is certainly the largest I have ever seen, and the examples even in the Britith Museum are smaller than the Formby bird. . . . I remember once falling in with one, which had been wounded, one evening by the sea shore. I thought I would take him home and make a pet of him in place of my black guillemot, which had lately succumbed to some internal injury. I caught him and tied my handkerchief around his breast and wings, and, carrying him under my arm, set out cheerfully for home. But I had not gone far before my hand, in which I carried my walking stick attracted his attention, and, with a vigorous peck, he took out a mouthful of epidermis and cuticle. I now began to think I had reckoned without my host. A happy thought then occurred to me. I would turn his head behind. This plan I adopted for some time with success, but going down a steep sandhill, I was rash enough to look around to see how he was going on. I was very disagreeably reminded of his existence, for turning his flexible neck rapidly upwards, he stabbed me deliberately under the chin! Again I bled—wound No. 2! After this I began to feel sorry I had ever taken him in hand at all, and at length I decided to release him, for I felt that our natures were very dissimilar."

LESSER BLACK BACKED GULL. Not by any means a common gull, but there are always a few of this species among the hordes of *laridae* which at times cover the shore.

HERRING GULL. One of the commonest of the gull tribe with us. The immature birds, of a grey colour all over, are more often obtained than adults. They take two full years to develop their full plumage.

COMMON GULL. Common indeed all along the coast line. Their numbers can be fairly imagined when I say an average flock will cover an acre of sand. When these birds are seen inland, the farmers consider it a sign of approaching bad weather, and I always find this warning as good as a barometer.

BLACK HEADED GULL. Breeds in small numbers in the sandhills every spring, and is often seen nesting close to the colonies of terns, or sea swallows, which remain with us for the summer.

MASKED GULL. A specimen of this rare gull is reported to have been shot during the winter of 1876 by Mr. Hubert Braddyll, then of Jesus College, Cambridge, but I cannot say where the specimen has got to.

GLAUCUS GULL. Another very rare gull. The late Mr. H. Dunford stated ("Zoologist," 1874) that he picked up an immature bird, with a broken wing, on the Formby shore on November 8th, 1873.

LITTLE GULL. A rare winter visitor. "One killed at Formby." (*Larus minutus.*) (Byerly, "Fauna of Liverpool.")

KITTIWAKE GULL. As common as the previous specimen is rare. Universally plentiful.

RICHARDSON'S SKUA. My father had a specimen of this bird, but unluckily it was not in a land "where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt," for the moths got at its plumage, and now it is a ruin of its former self.

POMATORHINE SKUA. Our Vicar, the Reverend Lonsdale Formby, was riding along the shore some years ago, when he saw what was to him a most unusual sight, viz., a black sea gull. Knowing the keen interest my father took in birds, he sent to the boat house and told the men there to bring their guns. Luckily their expedition proved successful, and we have the bird as a memento of the event.

COMMON TERN. A regular colony of these graceful birds breed in the slacks every summer. They are ruthlessly slaughtered directly the season comes in by "sportsmen" from Wigan and Manchester.*

SANDWICH TERN. Amongst the large flocks of the former species, are always a few specimens of this bird. We have two stuffed.

ARCTIC TERN. We have a specimen in immature plumage which was shot on the shore in the summer of 1888.

* COMMON TERN.—In one of my father's Lectures on the Birds of Formby, he says:—"I must not forget, while still among the Gulls, the regular inhabitant of the sandhills, *the sterna hirundo*, or Sea Swallow, and a host of *aliases*. The local name of 'Shrike,' or 'Skrife,' is very applicable to its ear-piercing note. I have seen many hundreds of these lovely creatures, all in the air at the same time during the nesting season, striving, as I imagine, like the plovers to attract the passer-by from their nests. They have approached so near to my head that I could have killed them with a stick. I once saw about ten or twelve terns in hot pursuit of two lordly herons. What could have been the subject of dispute I cannot even imagine, but with infinite shrieks, and constant attacks from the little persecutors, the herons rose circling higher and higher, until the terns were quite out of sight, and I could only recognize the two broadwinged waders against the clear blue sky. But I could still hear the hoarse croak of the herons, and the angry shrieks of the attacking party. And so, like Christian in the 'Pilgrim's Progress,' I went my way and saw them no more."

LESSER TERN. About the daintiest bird to be seen anywhere, having all the grace of the swallow tribe with the plumage of the tern. Fairly numerous in the summer time. The latest date I have seen it is October 31st.

GREY
PHALAROPE.
(*Phalaropus fulicarius.*)

Our example of this rare bird, half swimmer, half wader, was shot last season (1891), and was set up by Mr. Clarke, from whom I obtained the specimen. It is worth while noticing the fact that at the very date this bird was shot, large numbers of the same species were chronicled in the "Field," as having been seen at several places round the English Coast. A gale was blowing at the time, and it is most probably the fact that the hard weather just caught them on their autumn migration to the south'ard.

KNOT. A common winter visitor; occurring in large numbers all along the coast.
(*Tringa canutus.*)

BUFF BREASTED
SANDPIPER.
(*Tringa rufescens.*)

According to "The Birds of Lancashire," by Mr. F. S. Mitchell, a male bird was shot at Formby, on the banks of the Alt, about thirteen miles north of Liverpool, in May, 1829, and was sent to Liverpool market along with some snipes. This specimen passed into the possession of the Rev. T. Staniforth, late of Bolton Rectory, Skipton, who transmitted the record to Yarrell ("British Birds"). On referring to Yarrell's 2nd edition of "British Birds," I find the very bird mentioned as follows:—" . . . for the knowledge of the third specimen I am indebted to the Rev. T. Staniforth, of Skipton, in whose collection the bird is preserved. This gentleman kindly sent

me word that his example was killed at Formby, etc." It would be interesting to know whether this specimen is still in good condition, seeing that it was killed in the year 1829.

SANDERLING. Common with us in the summer-time.
(*Calidris arenaria.*)

LITTLE STINT. (*Tringa minuta.*) A specimen of this diminutive wader was killed about five years ago, out of a flock of sanderlings, by a fowler. Unluckily the moths have completely ruined it as a specimen.

DUNLIN. (*Tringa alpina.*) Of all the migratory winter visitors which come to our shore, the dunlin, or, as it is locally called, the "dun," is the commonest. Can only be numbered by thousands.

BAR TAILED GODWIT. This bird is common on the coast throughout the winter and is known by the fowlers as the "curlew jack."

BLACK TAILED GODWIT. Mr. C. S. Gregson has only met this species once on the Formby shore.

CURLEW. His noisy screeching "curlew" is the bane of the wild-fowl shooter. Common enough. The gulls and vast hordes of smaller waders appear to have appointed him "sentinel-in-chief" to the shore fowl.

WHIMBREL. Scarce. I have two examples stuffed, but he is by no means common on this coast.

REDSHANK. Not so common as might be expected considering the great number of shore birds, or rather "waders," which remain with us for the winter.

SPOTTED REDSHANK. A very rare visitor. Mr. C. S. Gregson (*Proc. Histor. Soc. Lanc. and Ches. 1865-66*) says he shot one at the mouth of the Alt in October, 1864.

COMMON SANDPIPER. Is to be seen every winter in countless numbers all along the sea shore. They appear especially fond of the mudflats lying to the South-west of the Formby Lifeboat House.*

RINGED PLOVER. Breeds in small numbers in the outer sandhills every year. (*Aegialitis hiaticula*) Its nest and eggs might be easily mistaken for those of a very small peewit.

GREY PLOVER. By no means a rare bird. Plenty are shot every winter by the professional gunners. (*Squatarola helvetica*.)

DOTTEREL. Very rare now-a-days. We have three specimens stuffed, which were killed at the mouth of the river Alt. (*Endromias morinellus*.)

PEEWIT. *Vanellus vulgaris.* } See "MOSS BIRDS." These two varieties are frequently met with and shot on the coast, especially during GOLDEN PLOVER. } severe frosts when the mosses are icebound.

SHORE LARK. Mr. F. S. Mitchell in the "Birds of Lancashire," (*Otocorvus alpestris*.) states:—"An exceedingly rare winter visitor. Mr. John Hardy informs me that two instances of the

*COMMON SANDPIPER.—William Dean, Walter Rimmer and James Meadows, three local gunners, once shot close on a hundred Dunlins and Sandpipers to their three barrels on a moonlight night during the severe frost of December, 1890.

bird have occurred in Lancashire, one at Trafford in 1857, and Mr. C. S. Gregson, writing in September, 1882, says he recently got two alive and six dead, caught in *gins* amongst sky larks, this being on the coast near Formby."

TURNSTONE. Occasionally shot by the fowlers.

OYSTER CATCHER. A resident species, breeding occasionally in some of the more secluded slacks,* but only in very small numbers. The writer once bagged nine at a single flying shot, with a heavy duck gun.

SCAUP DUCK. †Stand on the High Channel bank, 200 yards to the South of the Formby Lifeboat House at day-break on a Winter's morning, and, if no one has been there before you, † you will see the channel covered with these ducks; and they will be joined half-an-hour later by the mallards and widgeon which have spent the night feeding on the moss. Local name "wigeon."

* **SLACKS.**—This is the local name for a series of freshwater pools extending for several miles just inside the "outer sandhills." They are most of them quite dry in summer when they form an excellent breeding ground for many shore fowl. In some of the deeper and more secluded pools wild ducks breed regularly every year, and pheasants nest in considerable numbers on their banks, which are covered with long grasses and sand willow.

† **SCAUP DUCK.**—The method adopted by the fishermen on this coast for netting them is, I think, worthy of attention among these notes. Advantage is taken of their habit of reaching their food by diving, and a square, large meshed net is pegged about a foot from the sand over the beds of "cockle scur," which form the diet of these birds. The position of these cockle scur beds, as the young of the toothsome cockle is called, are easily ascertained by the fishermen, either by searching the shore for them or by watching the whereabouts of the vast flocks of scaup and scoter during the day time if the tide is up. The ducks may then be watched through a telescope, and if the nets are set, the birds will be seen diving and many of them never re-appear, for they simply dive head downwards into the treacherous meshes, which prevent them getting back to the surface. Scores are drowned. According to Mr. Mitchell's "Birds of Lancashire," half a cart load at a single tide is by no means an unusual catch in the nets which are set higher up the coast opposite Peel Castle. This system of netting ducks is called "Dowkering." Divers of various species are also caught.

† The gentleman who has been good enough to assist us in revising the proof sheets, says that no sensible man is likely to be there before you.

BLACK SCOTER. In one of my father's little note books he states (*Ædemia nigra.*) having passed in his little steam yacht through an immense flock of these birds which extended, without ever losing sight of them, from the Palace Hotel, at Birkdale, till they were abreast the N.W. Lightship at the entrance to the Mersey.

VELVET SCOTER. Amongst the clouds of black ducks, which may be (*Ædemia fusca.*) seen off the coast almost all the year round, are always a few of this species. They have white bars on the wing.

GOLDFENEYE DUCK. (*Clangula glaucion.*) I have one grand old male bird stuffed, and my father had two immature specimens all killed at Formby. The old males, with their white cheeks and their brilliant golden "iris," are very hard to obtain.

GREAT NORTHERN DIVER. One shot near New Brighton during the winter of 1890-91.

RED THROATED DIVER. Fairly numerous all through the winter. Dives with greatest facility, and can out-swim a well-equipped row boat. Local name "sparlin' hunter."

GUILLEMOT. Occurs after severe weather at sea. Purely a visitor.

RAZORBILL. Usually fairly plentiful after heavy weather at sea. We had one for some time on our pond here. He was not at all kindly treated by the tame ducks, who formed a "trades' union" against him.

LITTLE AUK. My father once found a specimen of this bird on the shore, stranded; so he waded into the sea and set it afloat again, and off it went.

PUFFIN. After a severe gale in the winter of 1879 my father found dozens of these birds washed up dead on the shore, driven by stress of weather from the Welsh coast, and drowned probably *en route*.*

SOLAN GOOSE
OR GANNET. Another sea bird, and out of his reckoning when he touched the beach at Formby and got killed by some inhospitable fowler.

CORMORANT. Frequently found dead on the shore after a heavy gale.

FULMAR PETREL. We had a fulmar alive on our pond for several days once, but sad to relate he died of starvation; for on dissection he was found to be half choked by a bone firmly fixed in lower part of the throat, *through which bone* all food had to pass.

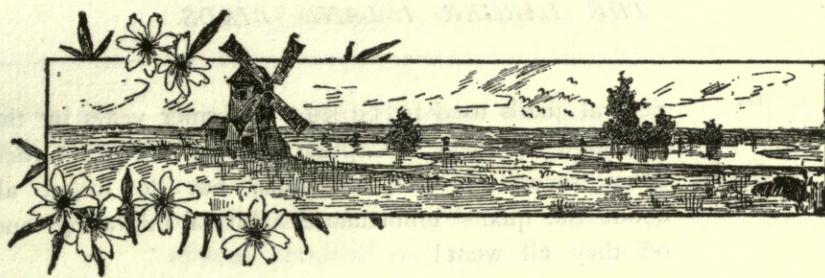
LEACH'S PETREL. Known also as the fork-tailed petrel. Several examples of this bird have occurred recently, and Mr. John Bushby, now of Frankby, near Birkenhead, has two in his possession which he shot when a resident at Formby. Out of six petrels which a fisherman brought me in November last year (1891) two were Leach's or fork-tailed petrels.

*PUFFIN.—Locally called "coulter neb," from the supposed resemblance of their "nebs" or beaks to the coulter of the plough.

STORMY PETREL. Occurs regularly every winter after any very heavy gales. Last winter a man brought me up a petrel with a whitish bar across the wing, which I tremblingly identified as the very rare Wilson's Petrel. Alas! Wilson's Petrel is very much longer on the leg than my bird which turned out to be merely a rather curious example of the fork-tailed variety. Messrs. Macpherson and Gurney, two well-known ornithologists, took a great interest in this bird, and were good enough to assist me in identifying it.*



*PETRELS.—I append the following notes from one of my father's little note books. "I have a very good specimen of Leach's or Fork-tailed Petrel which was blown on shore some four or five years since, during the frightful gale in which the "Ellen Southard" was wrecked, and when, in endeavouring to rescue the crew, the Liverpool Lifeboat was capsized, and, I think, twelve men drowned. There is a limit, we perceive, to the endurance of sea birds, and even to that of the Petrels, which are perhaps the best hard weather aeronauts amongst all the denizens of the air. Although they are only very small birds, they have very large names; one of them, the commoner kind, is called by naturalists *Thalassidroma pelagica*, the other *Thalassidroma procellaria*—the first being interpreted, meaning "The ocean walker of the sea," the other the "ocean walker of the tempest."



THE LARGER INLAND BIRDS.

GROUSE. No one would for a moment imagine that there had ever been grouse in the neighbourhood of Formby; but many old Lancashire books mention the fact, that in winter grouse often forsook the fells for the low-lying mosses.

PHEASANT. Thanks to the efficient "Keepering" of the present day, there is not much fear of this bird ever becoming extinct. Universally plentiful.

PARTRIDGE. Like the pheasant, this bird is too well looked after by the keepers to become scarce.*

* **PARTRIDGE.**—A note of my father's. "One of my greatest favourites was a hen partridge, which became completely domesticated at the house of the gamekeeper at Ainsdale. She used to run in and out of the house far more familiarly and infinitely more prettily than the most tame of the domestic hens which lived about the place. As I sat in a little alcove near the doorway, she would often come pecking warily close to my feet, and nothing but a deliberate insult to her confidence would drive her chuckling angrily away. She was very fond of sitting over what is not very elegantly termed the sinkstone, in the kitchen of the keeper's house, for there she often picked up scraps which might not otherwise have fallen to her share. I think I never saw a bird so plump as she was, and certainly never a wild bird so freed by kindness from the suspicion of her race. But alas! when the springtime came, some gay deceiver of her own tribe came also, and the warm shelter and friends of the winter were utterly forgotten. She heard his voice and left us for the desolation of the sandhills; but though she left us, I have not forgotten her, and I only hope that I did not shoot her in the following September."

QUAIL.
(*Coturnix communis*) Several quails used to be shot in former years by the partridge shooters. Captain Horsfall once turned down several in the sandhills, but he forgot all about the quails' unfortunate habit of migrating, and off they all went!

LANDRAIL OR
CORNCRAKE.
(*Gallinula crex.*) Common enough. Probably familiar to everyone by his harsh "crake-crake" in the fields on a quiet evening.

LITTLE CRAKE.
(*Gallinula minuta.*) A specimen of this bird was shot in the Formby "wams" in the year 1875, and is now in one of our cases. I remember my father telling me what a fierce outcry there was when he chronicled the death of this rare bird in the papers by many naturalists, who protested against the so-called "slaughter" of every rare visitor. All very well on paper, my warm-hearted friends, but tell me—would *you*, if you were walking up snipe ground, refrain from shooting at a "solitary snipe" for instance, if one happened to get up in front of you, simply because it is a rare bird? The outcry against the so-called destruction of one rare bird is in my opinion ridiculous, and when a bird of this description does happen to get slain and is reported in the scientific papers, ten to one it is in far better hands than many into which, if left, it might consequently have fallen.*

*When a bird can be properly seen and identified, I consider it a shame to shoot it; but when a strange bird rises with a "whirr" in front of you when you are shooting, you usually don't pause to ascertain whether it is a rarity or not before you fire.

WATER RAIL. This bird ought by rights to come under the heading (*Rallus aquaticus.*) of moss birds, but being on the subject of rails I enter him here. Not so common as the landrail, by any means, but yet he is not a rarity and is seldom obtained owing to his retiring habits.

SPOTTED RAIL. An occasional autumn visitor when migrating. Is (*Gallinula porzana.*) often caught in the snipe pantles.

MOORHEN. Common everywhere near pools, or in the moss (*Gallinula chloropus*) ditches.

COOT. Plentiful on the lake at Ince Blundell Hall, the residence of Squire Weld-Blundell.

CALIFORNIAN PARTRIDGE. A specimen of this foreign partridge was brought to me several years ago, having been picked up under the telegraph wires. The Editor of the "Field," to whom I sent it, informed me that it had probably escaped from some aviary, never having occurred in England. So much for my rarity.

BUZZARD. "During the winter months, and especially in hard weather, it often descends to the vicinity of the coast, and at this season has several times been killed on Walney and in the sandhills between Liverpool and Southport." (F. S. Mitchell, "Birds of Lancashire.")

ROUGH LEGGED BUZZARD. A female of this species was killed near Formby Hall, in November, 1884, while eating rabbits in the traps.

OSPREY. A specimen of this bird is said to have been shot on the Scarisbrick estate in April, 1880.

PEREGRINE FALCON. We have an adult male in our collection, but I have no record whence he came.

HOBBY. This dainty little hawk is purely an accidental visitor. It evidently was a very accidental visit to the bird which adorns one of our cases.

MERLIN. Occasionally seen and occasionally shot, oftener by the keepers than by anyone else.

MARSH HARRIER. Byerly ("Fauna of Liverpool") states that this bird is frequently seen in the sandhills about Crosby and Formby. (Mather.)

HEN HARRIER. The older mossmen describe a big blue hawk which used to breed fifty years ago on the new moss.

KESTREL. One of the commonest of the hawk tribe to be seen about here. I once kept a couple of kestrels and tried to tame them. But methinks they had already had a short period in the wild state, for they shunned my friendly advances, and only became at all tame when I had their dinners with me. Their conduct then was positively fraternal.

SPARROW HAWK. Another common hawk about here. Breeds near Formby Hall and in the woods round Ince Blundell, and would soon become plentiful but for the incessant war waged against them by the keepers.

BARN OWL. About the commonest of the "strix" or owl tribe to be found in Formby. Incessantly persecuted by the keepers as vermin. In my opinion he does a deal more good than harm.

LONG EARED OWL. By no means a rare bird about here. His food consists entirely of mice.

SHORT-EARED OWL. Common enough all over the district. Breeds occasionally in old disused hay lofts or the trunk of some dead tree.

WOODCOCK. Mark cock! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! until distance has lent enchantment to the view, and *scolopax rusticola* is a mile away. During flight time the woodcocks will drop anywhere for a short rest. A garden in the very centre of the village has been known to hold one, and they are frequently put out of the young firs which surround the writer's house. They say a man will stalk a "ten pointer" all day, and perhaps kill him in the end, but that he does not inwardly feel half the satisfaction that a man does who has killed the *only* woodcock at a big covert shoot.

WOOD PIGEON. Breeds frequently in all the woods around Formby, and is about the most cunning bird alive.

STOCK DOVE. Nests in the rabbit holes nearest the shore.

ROOK. Universally common.

JACKDAW.

I once saw a very Conservative Jackdaw's nest near here, for at the bottom of it was a piece of an ancient "Times" newspaper, and a collection of odds and ends sufficient to stock a minute "old curiosity shop."

CARRION CROW. Occasionally seen in winter on the shore.

HOODED CROW. We have a specimen, which has been half-ruined by the moths.

JAY.

I have only once seen this bird in Formby. There are no large woods near for them to roost in.

MAGPIE.

I cannot remember ever having noticed a magpie in Formby, but my old friend Mr. Clarke tells me that forty years ago they were exceedingly plentiful, especially round Formby Hall woods.





THE SMALLER INLAND BIRDS.

A MAN who professes to be an observant ornithologist can always be tested as to the amount of his knowledge by his notes on the smaller varieties. And here I must in all true humility confess that my notes on the smaller inland birds are very far from what they should be, in order to do the subject justice. Want of time must be my excuse.

STARLING. I should say that in winter time the sparrow and the starling run each other very close in point of numbers. Both are so common that they become a nuisance. Firwood, the home of Mr. Arthur Ashton, is a favourite roosting place for these birds, which flock there in countless thousands every evening. About the most curious place for a starling's nest was chronicled in the "Field" news-

paper in 1880, particulars of which will be found in the foot-note at the bottom of this page.* Local name "shebster."

COMMON THRUSH. Common by name and common by nature. Local name "throstle." Mr. Clarke has a specimen in one of his cases of a light cream colour all over.

MISSEL THRUSH. I have never seen the nest of this bird in Formby. Occasionally seen.

FIELDFARE. Plentiful during migration time.

WHEATEAR. Commonly known as the "whit-tail." This bird can be easily snared by setting horsehair slipnooses on some bank from which the outer "crust" of sand has been scraped away. They will fly back to the place out of sheer curiosity.

REDWING. When skating on the slacks in the severe winter of 1890-91, G. Rheam and the writer ran down scores of redwings and fieldfares, which were so weak as to be scarcely able to get out of our way. I fear the thaw came too late for hundreds of them, for the destruction to bird life during that period of ice and snow must have been enormous.

**Re "CURIOUS NEST OF A STARLING."*—On one occasion I remember finding the nest of a starling in a very curious place. There was a few years ago, and some remains are there even now, the wreck of a brig on our shore, which, I think, was called the "Virago." She was quite surrounded by the water at half-tide, and at high water she would be fully half-a-mile from the shore. But in her strong oaken timbers a pair of starlings had thought proper to build their nest, and I have frequently listened to their youthful chatterings within the ceiling of the battered wreck. Luckily the weather continued fine during the hatching season, for anything approaching a gale would have produced a swell sufficient to have immersed the feathered mariners beneath every wave. I have reason to believe, however, that they were reared successfully, left their seaside home in peace."—J. W. Field, 1880. It was in this same wreck, I believe, that the following incident occurred, showing how closely the comical treads on the heels of the tragical in this world. The brother of our then gardener, happening to be on the shore the day after the wreck, and seeing the stem of the ship cast up high and dry upon sand, felt it either his duty or his interest to investigate the condition and contents of the captain's cabin. His companion, who was my informant, suggested a heap of *debris* in the corner as next worthy of his attention. Our hero boldly attacked the pile of wreckage, but was in the act of turning it over, when he suddenly withdrew his hand with a yell and took ignominiously to flight. To make a long story short, the captain's cat, disordered and alarmed by the stirring events of the night, had made his teeth meet in the hand of the intruder upon his privacy.

NOTE BY WRITER.—It must be remembered that the majority of these notes are by my father.

BLACKBIRD. Common, and breeding everywhere.

WHINCHAT. A summer migrant. By no means plentiful.

STONECHAT. Has been known to breed in the "outer sandhills" occasionally.

REDBREAST. Well known to everyone. Nesting everywhere.

WHITETHROAT. Common in the summer time.

BLACKCAP. Fairly plentiful in this district. I have seen this bird in a cornfield, hanging on to the stalks of corn.

YELLOW WARBLER. Fairly numerous in the summer.

REED WARBLER. I am puzzled as to the identity of a warbler which I put up on the moss one day. It was either a reed warbler or a sedge warbler, but which of the two species I cannot say.

HEDGE SPARROW. "Dunnock." Common everywhere.

LONGTAILED TIT. Byerly, in his "Fauna of Liverpool," 1856, states that the long tailed tit is not uncommon near Liverpool in winter, and Mr. Clarke has often seen them and frequently had specimens brought to him for stuffing.

GREAT TIT. Fairly plentiful.

BLUE TIT. Common. It is a charming sight watching the tits climbing prettily round a lump of fat, which has been hung in front of the windows of the house in winter time.

COLE TIT. Also fairly numerous.

WREN. Plentiful everywhere.

PIED WAGTAIL. Common, and I have several times found its nest in Formby.

YELLOW WAGTAIL. Fairly numerous.

MEADOW PIPIT. Commonly known as the sky-lark. *Hundreds of dozens* of these beautiful little songsters are snared every winter, when the snow is on the ground, in the "pantles." A long narrow strip of land about two hundred yards long and a foot wide is completely cleared of snow, and down this strip is stretched a long thin cord, from which dozens of treacherous horse-hair nooses are arranged. The birds will make to this open strip in thousands, especially if a few handfuls of grain are placed under the pantles. All kinds of small birds are captured.*

RICHARD'S PIPIT. Byerly states that the Rev. T. Staniforth, of Skipton, has a specimen which was shot at Crosby.

ROCK PIPIT. Is mentioned in several works on Natural History as occurring frequently near Liverpool.

SPOTTED FLYCATCHER. Common.

SWALLOW. No one interested in birds could fail to take an interest in the exquisitely graceful appearance and

***SKY-LARK.**—Jack Aindow and the writer were sitting in a small gunning punt in the Formby Channel, on January 23rd, 1890, about ten a.m., when a regular flight of meadow pipits came past us. We were lying, made fast to a net stake, and the poor little birds came flitting along about a yard off the water in flocks of fifty or a hundred. We lay there half-an-hour and they were passing us all the time. Jack Aindow called them mountain larks, as they were of a very much darker colour than the ordinary meadow pipit. The weather was bitterly cold and frosty, and the birds were flying South-West.

movements of the *Hirundimde* or swallow tribe. And there is about them a certain air of mystery, for, though we know the winter resort of the few, we know not where the great majority are to be accounted for during the long months of cold weather in England. But this also we do know, that after an absence amounting to half the entire year, they have the charming habit of returning to the very spot which they or their young ones left the year before; and this after a search for sun and warmth of, at least, one thousand miles, for I believe that few of them venture to pass the winter north of the latitude of the extreme South of Spain. My father and myself, when at Gibraltar some seven years ago, observed swallows "hawking" for flies during the month of January, when the thermometer was as high as the average of an English summer, but probably the birds knew, if any hard weather came on, that the sun-burnt wastes of Africa were not an hour's flight away.

SWIFT.

A summer visitor. Fairly numerous.

MARTIN.

A summer migrant. Plentiful.

SAND MARTIN.

There are at least three different colonies of these little birds in Formby, whose nests are in the holes in the side of a steep sand "cleft," from which the farmers have cut their peat.

GREENFINCH.

Common, and breeds plentifully all over the parish.

HOUSE SPARROW.

E

Needless to state he is very common.

BRAMBLING. Is often caught in the lark pantles during snowy weather.

LINNET. Very common everywhere.

TWITE. Not so numerous as many of the other smaller birds.

BULLFINCH. Is seen very rarely. Mr. Shepherd, a local resident, has noticed but two on the golf links.

YELLOW HAMMER. Common.

LAPLAND BUNTING. One caught on the Formby Coast during the winter of 1881-82, and kept alive for some time by Mr. C. S. Gregson.

SNOW BUNTING. A rare bird. Only occurs in small numbers during very severe weather, when they are frequently caught in the lark pantles.

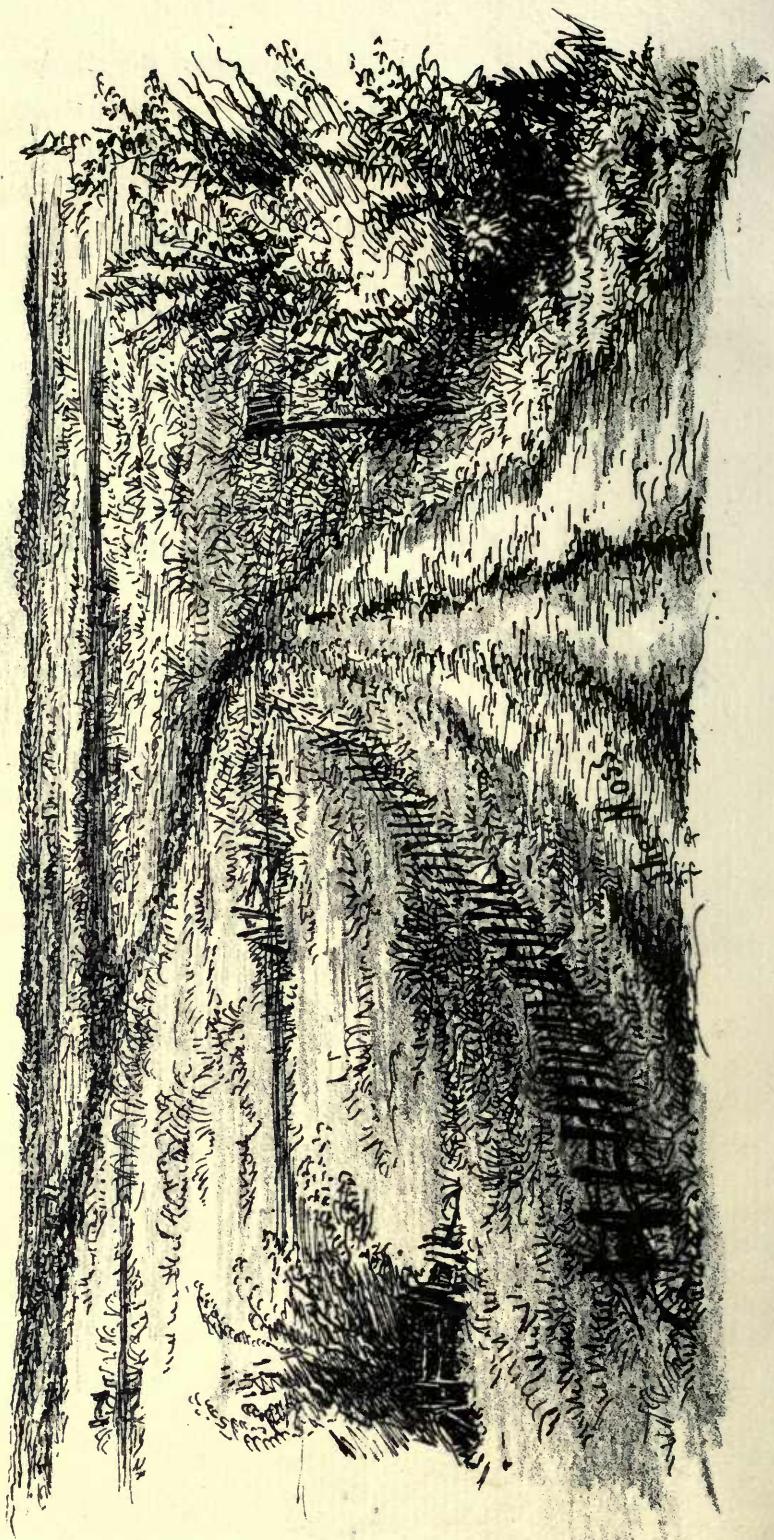
ROSE-COLOURED STARLING. "One shot near the windmill at Ainsdale, and purchased by T. Eccleston, Esq., of Scarisbrick." ("Glazebrook's Guide to Southport.")

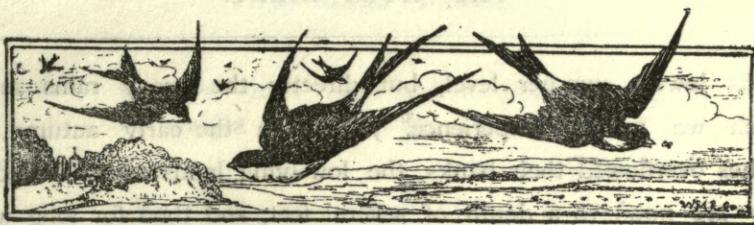
WOODPECKER. We have one woodpecker stuffed, but they are rare birds about here owing to the absence of any thickly wooded country.

KINGFISHER. I have seen this bird skimming over the lake at Ince Blundell, several times on the Moss, and also in the Formby Fields. Mr. John Formby, of Formby Hall, writes me that about the year 1860, a pair of kingfishers bred in the bank at the side of a broad dytche close to the old Brewery, and he has seen one on the Hall pond.

CUCKOO. A spring and summer visitor. Fairly numerous.







THE MOSS BIRDS.

THE average inhabitant of Formby would hardly believe it when I say that nearly all the ditches in Formby run inland. But it is so; and this is one of the reasons why the moss is the swamp it is. True, a great deal of it is cultivated, but often the land is so wet in July that it cannot bear the weight of a mowing machine, and so the scythe has to do its work. The Mosses, Downholland, Sawder 'Eyes, Throtacles, Charlie's Ground, Formby, New and Old 'Ey, as each strip is locally called, were formerly an undivided stretch of flat dreary country: flat, indeed, for many a weary mile, until the first "symptoms" of rising ground below Ormskirk terminates the view. Once upon a time, as the story books say, it was almost entirely uncultivated.* A few cattle grazed on its sweet meadow grasses in July, when the water in the ditches was

* FORMBY MOSS.—My old friend Mr. Clarke, who has all his life been a keen ornithologist and an excellent bird stuffer, can remember when he had to jump from one tussock of heather to another in order to avoid the swampy peat, which intervened in crossing over the Moss. Anyone going into Liverpool from Formby in those days, had to ride on horseback to Hightown, and often wait hours at the "runs of Alt." in order to cross that stream at dead low water. Think of that, ye modern Formbyite, who grumbles when the train happens to be ten minutes late some morning!

at its lowest summer level, but directly the heavy rains set in, which we usually experience, yearly, in the early autumn, the ditches overflowed their banks, the low-lying lands were flooded (as they are now) to a depth of several feet, and then for long weary winter months the bare tract was given over to the wild ducks and other wild fowl. They tell a little story about a certain well-known horse breeder, who once stood on the Cut bridge, and looked over the far stretching expanse of country. He noticed the grand turf and the waving fields of knee-deep grass, and then he murmured "What a grand country for breeding horses." Chance brought it about that he saw the same land in early winter, about the middle of November, where for three long miles before him, lay an unbroken sheet of peaty water, save where the gate posts and rush beds, which bound the ditches, stood out here and there amid the dreary waste. He only said quietly "Horses, indeed! more likely for breeding fish," and then went home again.

GENUS ANATIDÆ.

MALLARD. *(Anas boscas.)* A common resident, breeding plentifully on all the mosses, also on some of the more secluded "marl" pits, and on some of the slacks nearer the shore. I killed a mallard not long ago,* and on his being opened and cleaned for the table, a few days later, a small white bird's skull was found in his crop. It was the skull of some bird of the finch class, and the only reason I can offer for its being where it was, is,

* Written by my father about the year 1878.

that the duck swallowed it when feeding on some dark night in mistake for a small potato.*

WIDGEON. One of the commonest of the winter visitors. The joy of the moss duck shooter, and the mainstay of the professional "fleeters." I have seen these birds in the decoy at Hale, "looking" as tame as any pinioned bird on the lake of some public park, but let them see you, and they are off like lightning. Their cry is not at all duck-like. The "Whee-oh" of the cock bird has probably got them their local name of "Wowin widgin."

TEAL. Very common on the moss in the winter. Occasionally shot on the shore and more secluded pools. A flock of from fifty to a hundred and fifty of these

*MALLARD.—(Note by my father.) To me the chief objects of interest in the neighbourhood have always been the tribe of *anatidae* or wild ducks, of which we are favoured with the visits of many specimens, some rare, and others of frequent occurrence. The common wild duck is shot daily and nightly by the hardy race of professional sportsmen who are called locally, "flukes," from the fact that they obtain their quarry when it is pursuing its flight, or as it is locally pronounced, "fleet," to or from the sea. Hour after hour, they stand at some well-known favoured spot, waiting for the "flash" of wings in the declining light, or guided simply by the rush of rapid beatings, whose "wish" ere long after sunset denotes the presence of the game. Then the practised shooter aims well in front of the noisy throng above, and is sometimes, but by no means always, rewarded by the pleasant thud of a good fat mallard on the ground. . . . The mallard and his wife, the wild duck, are remarkable under different circumstances, at once for their great selfishness and care of themselves, and at other times for their utter forgetfulness of their own safety. This statement may appear paradoxical, but the fact remains that, when the cares of maternity are over, there is no more wary wild bird than the common duck, nor one which exposes its life more recklessly for their protection while its callow brood continues under its care. I have myself observed more than one touching instance of this latter fact. One day, while walking along through the sandhills, as is my frequent habit, I suddenly chanced upon a wild duck in a secluded valley, with its wings widespread upon the ground. Not hearing my approach upon the soft and noiseless sands, I became the witness of what was to me a very beautiful sight. Little lumps of down, not much larger than a lady's thimble, kept running in and out of their mother's tender wings, and following and pecking at one another in the most fascinating and simple manner. At length, observing me, an unknown intruder, they hastened back to the soft shelter they had left. The mother's back was turned, and, for some short space, she saw me not. But the little voices had given her the alarm, and seeing me not far away, the scene was instantly changed! The mother uttered some loud peremptory quacks, which seemed to be thoroughly understood by her tiny family. They ran for their little lives to a star-grass thicket hard by, while their self-sacrificing parent lay down, on her side, simulating the agonies of approaching dissolution. All was perfect! The drooping head the apparently broken wing, even the last final kick of a single leg—considered so sure a sign of sympathy upon the tragic stage—were all given to perfection. . . . But so soon as she saw her little darlings in safety like an arrow from a bow, in the words of Ovid, *tenuis Vane'scit in auras*, she vanished into thin air, unwounded and unhurt." (Note by the writer.) "When fishing away up in Ross-shire last year at a lonely lodge fifty miles from anywhere, we often came across an old duck crossing the Loch with her tiny broodlings 'in tow.' The old ducks adopted similar measures then to attract us away from their precious little ones."

pretty little ducks is by no means an unusual sight during the winter months. As good to eat as he is good to look upon.

SHELDRAKE. Breeds regularly in the sandhills. A few remain (*Tadorna canuta.*) throughout the winter.

SHOVELLER. Is shot pretty regularly each winter on the moss. (*Spatula clypeata.*) He is called "Scooper Wigin" by the local fowlers.

PINTAIL. A rare bird here. Has been shot once or twice (*Dafila acuta.*) during the last three severe winters, and is known locally as the "fan-tailed wigin."

LONG-TAILED DUCK. (*Harelda glacialis.*) This bird is essentially a sea duck, but I have included it among the moss birds, seeing that my father obtained a specimen once which was found exhausted on the Moss by a "fleeter," after a series of severe westerly gales.*

SCAUP DUCK. I have shot a specimen of this duck on the Moss; (*Fuligula marila.*) probably enticed there by his friends, the mallards, who have lured him to his destruction, in mistake for doing him a good turn, and showing him a good place to get a dinner.

***LONG-TAILED DUCK.**—In my father's Notes, he says:—"An extremely interesting specimen of the duck tribe was brought to me one day by a 'fleeter.' I found, on examination, that it was an instance of *Fuligula glacialis*, otherwise called the sea pheasant, and I have never seen it in Formby before or since. I remember thinking how charming it would look, with its long tail feathers and handsome shape when the cut of the taxidermist had ensured its preservation. The next morning, being in a hurry, I unfortunately omitted to take it into Liverpool to be set up. Upon inquiring for it shortly after, what was my horror to find that my rare and cherished specimen had been plucked and eaten. And this is the reason why I cannot show you the bird to-night. (A Lecture). Such are the vicissitudes of human life. It is considered a rare bird, and its occurrences are carefully recorded by naturalists even on our Eastern Coasts, where this variety is not so unfrequent as in Lancashire."

GADWALL. Mr. C. S. Gregson (*Proc. Hist. Soc. Lanc., etc., 1866*) has one adult and one young bird, both shot near Altcar in April, 1865. Exceedingly rare everywhere.
(*Chaulclasmus strepenus.*)

GARGANEY. "One killed on Martin Mere several years ago." (F. S. Mitchell. "Birds of Lancashire.")
(*Querquedula circia.*)

TUFTED DUCK. An occasional winter visitor. We have killed several
(*Fuligula cristata.*) during the past three seasons.

AMERICAN WIDGEON. An exceedingly rare bird. We have a specimen in one of our cases which was killed several years ago near Hightown.

WILD SWAN. About forty wild swans were seen on Throtacre Moss
(*Genus cygnus.*) during the severe weather of December, 1890, which was designated by the papers as "the Great frost." These birds were the genuine wild swan, having no knob on the upper mandible. The first train over the Moss embankment sent them clanging off to the south, not before James Sutton of Mosside Farm had made an ineffectual attempt to get a shot at them. Mr. John Bushby, a former resident, once killed I believe a swan on the shore. A deal of mystery surrounds the death of this bird, for the shooter himself declares it greatly resembled a tame bird !

WILD GEESE. Grey geese. Say the word "rats" to an Irish terrier and he is instantly ready for action; say the word "geese" to a mossman and he will at

once throw off his customary sleepiness and quietly murmur "wheer are they?" There are always a few of these fowl in the neighbourhood every winter, coming and going as the weather changes. Occasionally one sees a dozen or so flying over the fields in a V or wedge-shaped skein during the day-time, but as a rule they spend the day on some far away sandpit on the shore "flats," coming in from the sea in the evening to feed on the stubble-land. I cannot say to which species of grey goose these birds belong, never having bagged one myself, and the farmers simply describe them as "a grey goose." I have often seen them when duck shooting on the moss, but so far their Machiavelian cunning has been too much for us, consequently no number appears under that tempting heading "wild geese" in the little game book.

BRENT GOOSE. An occasional winter visitor, never remaining long with us, owing to the very poor crop of *zostera marina* or sea grass, on which this bird principally feeds.
(*Bernicla brenta.*)

GOOSANDER. We have an adult male and female in winter
(*Mergus merganser.*) plumage, stuffed, which were shot by Jack Aindow from the "boat house" in October, 1889.

RED BREASTED MERGANSER. The late Dr. Skaife chronicles an old male captured on February 10th, 1838, near Southport.

CRESTED GREBE. We have a grand old male bird with full crest and plume, killed on the Moss in the year 1890.

SCLAVONIAN GREBE. A very rare winter visitor. Mr. C. S. Gregson records a young bird having been shot in February, 1864, near the mouth of the Alt.

EARED GREBE. An immature specimen in our collection.

LITTLE GREBE. Commonly known as "dowker," the Lancashire name for "diver." I have seen and shot him several times in the "New Cut."

HERON. Common all over the Moss, owing to the proximity of the ancient heronry at Scarisbrick Hall, the seat of the Marquis of Casteja. I never see the use of shooting these handsome birds myself; they do as much good as harm here, and we have no trout stream for them to devastate. The taxidermist took three mice from a specimen which I sent to him, found dead in a frozen ditch during the hard frost of 1890.

BITTERN. A specimen of this very rare bird was killed on (Botaurus stellaris.) Sawder Heyes* on Thursday, January 21st, 1892, by Mr. Richard Sutton, of Mosside Farm. Mr. John Formby, of Formby Hall, has another specimen at his home, which was killed many years ago on Formby Moss.†

* SAWDER HEYES.—A corruption of Southern Heyes, meaning the South Moss.

† BITTERN.—Mr. Formby's specimen was killed early in the present century, and it reflects great credit on the man who stuffed it, that it should have lasted so long.

SNIPE. Common enough most of the year, but especially so (*Scolopax gallinago*) during the autumn and spring migration, when the home breeders are considerably augmented in numbers by the travellers from afar. Snipe are snared in great numbers every autumn in what are locally known as snipe "pantles." Round the muddy edges of the water in some flooded field is stretched a long cord, from which innumerable horse-hair slip-nooses are arranged. When setting the pantle, the men tread the ground sideways with their feet, leaving in the sodden ground what appears to be a narrow splash of water at night. Teal, plovers, snipe and plenty of other small birds are the principal victims, and as many as 60 or 70 in a single night during the flight or migration time is not considered an unusual catch. Snipe also breed with us in considerable numbers, and I have found the young all hatched out by May 22nd. Little fluffy-looking, russet-coloured dots of down, with their two little coal black eyes watching one as they lie still as mice in some slight hollow in the ground, whilst their parents wheel round us with plaintive cries of despair.

JACK SNIPE.
(*Limnocryptes gallinula*.)

Not so plentiful as the above species, but yet by no means rare. The stupidest bird alive. You may miss him as often as you like, and if you only stick to it and practice at him, you will certainly bag him in an hour or so, for he seldom flies beyond two hundred yards at a time.

CURLEW. See SHORE BIRDS. This bird is not nearly so common on the moss as on the shore. But on

both places his habits are the same; standing with his restless eye roving all over the country, giving a mournful "curlew" if his eye happens to catch sight of the glint of a gun-barrel anywhere within two miles of him.

GOLDEN PLOVER. Plentiful in frosty weather, when the snow sends them down from the fells. Their numbers are thinned considerably by the professional gunners.
(*Charadrius pluvialis.*)

PEEWIT. Of all the birds which may be called "wild fowl," I think the peewit is far and away the commonest. From year's end to year's end, his restless "peewit" is with us, and his numbers never seem to diminish. A fair idea of the numbers of peewits which breed here may be judged when the reader has heard the following true tale. Our village chimney sweeper was sent for to sweep some chimneys which had been annoying us considerably, but he sent the following message back to my father.—"Tell Mister Wrigley as I shant sweep no chimbleys so long as tuwits' eggs is agate." Showing that gathering the eggs of the peewit paid him better than his legitimate trade.*

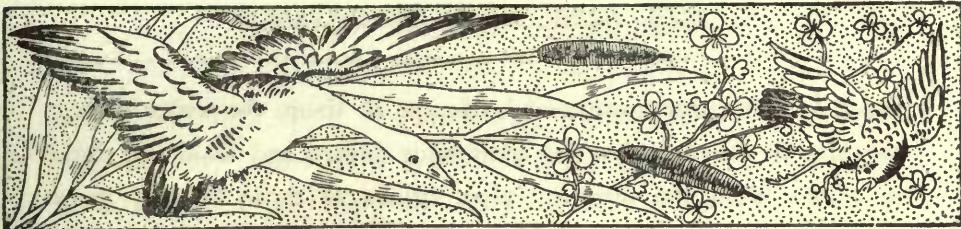
This brings me to the close of my notes. In all about 150 species have been recorded as Formby Birds; doubtless there are

*The Formby man's idea of London is not a bad one. He went up to London by coach seventy years ago, and on his return he was looked upon as a veritable Captain Cook, and people asked him what London was like: "Oh, ay," he said, "its summut like Formby, a great big stragglin' place, wi' no beginnin' and no endin'."

many which have escaped my notice, many are insufficiently identified, and one or two occurred so many years ago that they can hardly be honestly claimed as Formby Birds. Scores of rare birds have been killed in the district, and probably have been plucked and eaten in years gone by,* when ornithologists were few and far between; but I don't think a single rare example which has been shot since 1870 has been omitted from these pages; and to all the authorities whom I have quoted in this little book, I tender my most hearty thanks for the assistance they have afforded me. I also wish to add, that I hope the reader has not been greatly puzzled by my constant reference to my father's notes; but as I have merely finished a task which my father was busy on almost up to a few weeks before his death, it has been very awkward arranging his papers and lectures, all of which were written in "the first person."



*The Formby men are great eaters. Their fame in this line has spread far and wide, as the following story will show. Two of the inhabitants once entered a small restaurant in Liverpool, in the window of which was displayed in large letters "Try our two shilling dinner." They quietly entered, and in the true dialect of their forefathers, asked "Wheer mon we git agate on yo'r two shillun' dinner?" The landlord, with terror depicted on his countenance, at once asked them politely "Were they Formby men?" "Yes" chimed in the visitors. Instantly diving his hand into his pocket he bribed them at two shillings and sixpence each, to go out; as he knew they could tackle a sovereign's worth without turning a hair.



“THOSE GEESE.”

THE DREAM OF A WINTER EVENING.

FOR three successive seasons those geese had fairly out-witted us. Time after time had we seen them scudding over the swampy land in one great skein, or curiously formed V shaped wedge, sheering off half-a-mile out of shot directly they noticed our crouching forms amid the thin rushes, in which we had vainly attempted to conceal ourselves. Often had we heard them, “clanging” loudly above us on some dark winter evening when coming home from the “flight” or “fleet,” as it is locally called, with, maybe, a couple of ducks and a teal in our pockets. Jim had shot at them now and again, but always a long shot, a sort of “forlorn hope” that a chance pellet might bring one thumping to the ground. But all our efforts to overcome their Machiavelian cunning had been in vain, and no entry under that tempting heading “Wild Geese” appeared in the little game book. I can’t exactly say how it was, but one

night, after another unsuccessful attempt at them, the writer quietly sat himself down in his pet chair after dinner, and amid the cloud of smoke from the favourite pipe, visions of those fat grey geese came whirling in front of him. How was it that, whenever we were out after curlews and dunlins on the shore, the geese came within shot of almost every farm-hand near the place on the Moss beat. Ask a labourer who had seen them, "Were they close to?" he would reply, "Close to! I should think they wos. Ahr Jack counted seventeen o' them sitting along th' ice, and he cu'd 'a killed foive or six if he'd 'ad 'is gun wi' 'im." Then off we set some evening, flighting for ducks on the Moss, and nary a goose would we see. Next day, perhaps, strolling along the shore looking for shells or other marine curios, a fisherman would hail us and tell us great stories of geese that had to be "shoo'ed" at before they'd rise. And so, amid the ever-changing wreaths of smoke-cloud drifting about in front of the writer's chair, little wonder that a horde of great fat wild geese should appear and mock at him, as a drowsy feeling comes over one, the pipe slowly drops to the floor, the eyes close, the tired legs stretch out "of their own accord," and—and

A cold winter afternoon is gradually drawing to a close, and already the sun is sinking behind a great "mass" of pillow like clouds over the sea away to the westward. The Moss is indeed a dreary sight. The farther distance is shut out from our view by a curtain of mist, and the land lies stretched out before us, covered by a fresh fall of snow, relieved here and there by the gate-posts

and thicker rush beds. For two long weeks the maze of dytches and even the "Cut" itself has been thronged with skaters, and the ducks and teal are being tossed about in the Channel, living as best they can on the unaccustomed diet of the bare mud flats. The thaw of yesterday, which drove away the skaters from the Mosslands, has again left us, and once more King Winter rules supreme.

Here are Jim and the writer tramping off down the snowy road towards a well-known "clough," where we know will be open water. It is an awkward place to shoot. In the autumn we can only reach the spot with the aid of the leaping-pole, for that particular place lies amid a score of deep broad dytches, full of cold, black-looking, peaty water. How I wish I had brought the old dog, but he was quite forgotten until we were well on our way. Here and there, on crossing some flooded field, now ice-bound, the snow gave way beneath us and let us into a foot of cold water, showing that the thaw had partly done its work, and that the Moss was no longer to be trusted as a skating ground. After a short scramble and a few awkward jumps with the long pole, we reached the Chisnel Clou', as the big ditch is called, and all along the edge of the snow-covered ice round the open water, we see the traces of the innumerable wild fowl which have fed there the last few nights. The snow is covered with the imprints of their webbed feet, and here and there feathers are to be seen in plenty, showing that the place has not been long forsaken, or the feathers would have been blown away. Jim goes 80 yards to the north, and the writer

seats himself on a log of wood 60 or 70 yards to the south of the favoured spot. Usually, when waiting for the flight during early autumn, peewits and odd curlew come whistling round, brightening up the bare stretch of Moss with their busy plaintive cries, while snipe rise up now and again and skim off over our heads to find some more favoured feeding ground before night comes down on them. But to-day, not a peewit is to be heard, not a snipe could be found for miles, and the curlews, which always look after No. 1, are feeding happily on the toothsome moluscs on the sea-shore.

Night is closing in over this true winter scene, when, with a "whirr" and a flash, half-a-dozen dainty teal come past me, and are out of shot before I have time even to raise my gun. But the flight is now on, and a few ducks can be seen high up in the air, reconnoitering that tempting "Clou'" before they finally decide to dine there. But whether they notice the unfamiliar black forms of Jim and myself, which surely were not there last night, or whether they fancy some other open piece of water which they know of and we don't, I can't say, but none came within shot. Then follows a moment or two of quietness; but almost imperceptibly I notice a quiet, rushing noise behind me, and I quickly glance round. One look is enough. Making straight for the "Clou'," with their long necks out-stretched, their feet all ready for "settling," come about 20 fine geese. Pulling out my No. 4's as hastily as I possibly could, and jamming in a couple of big B.B.'s, I up with the gun and pull both barrels into the middle of them. A flash in the dim light, a tremendous "bang," a blood-curdling

yell from Jim of "one's down," and I duck my head clear of the smoke which hangs around me and see a goose flapping away full speed for the frozen brook with a single broken wing. This is too much. Dropping my gun on the log, with a frantic rush I dash away after the bird which is doing a record pace for the "boundary brook." Seeing me in full chase, the bird redoubles his efforts, crossed a snow-covered ditch at the end of the field and makes the best of his way to the brook. Crash bang went the writer on to the snow and ice-covered ditch, crack went the ice and IN went "yours truly," while the cold (oh! so cold) peat water closed affectionately into his cartridge pockets and into the long shooting boots. But the sight of that wretched goose scrambling with his broken wing behind him up the bank into "sanctuary" over the boundary made me make a superhuman attempt to reach *terra firma*, which was luckily successful. Then off again with limbs as cold as ice and a "squelch, squelch" of water in dripping clothes after that wretched bird. I dash up the cut-bank, and then, with a cry of delight, fling myself bodily on to the goose which is just about to cross over. At last! after many a long stalk and many a long crawl, a genuine *bona-fide* wild goose is at last in my power! What joy! My first goo—

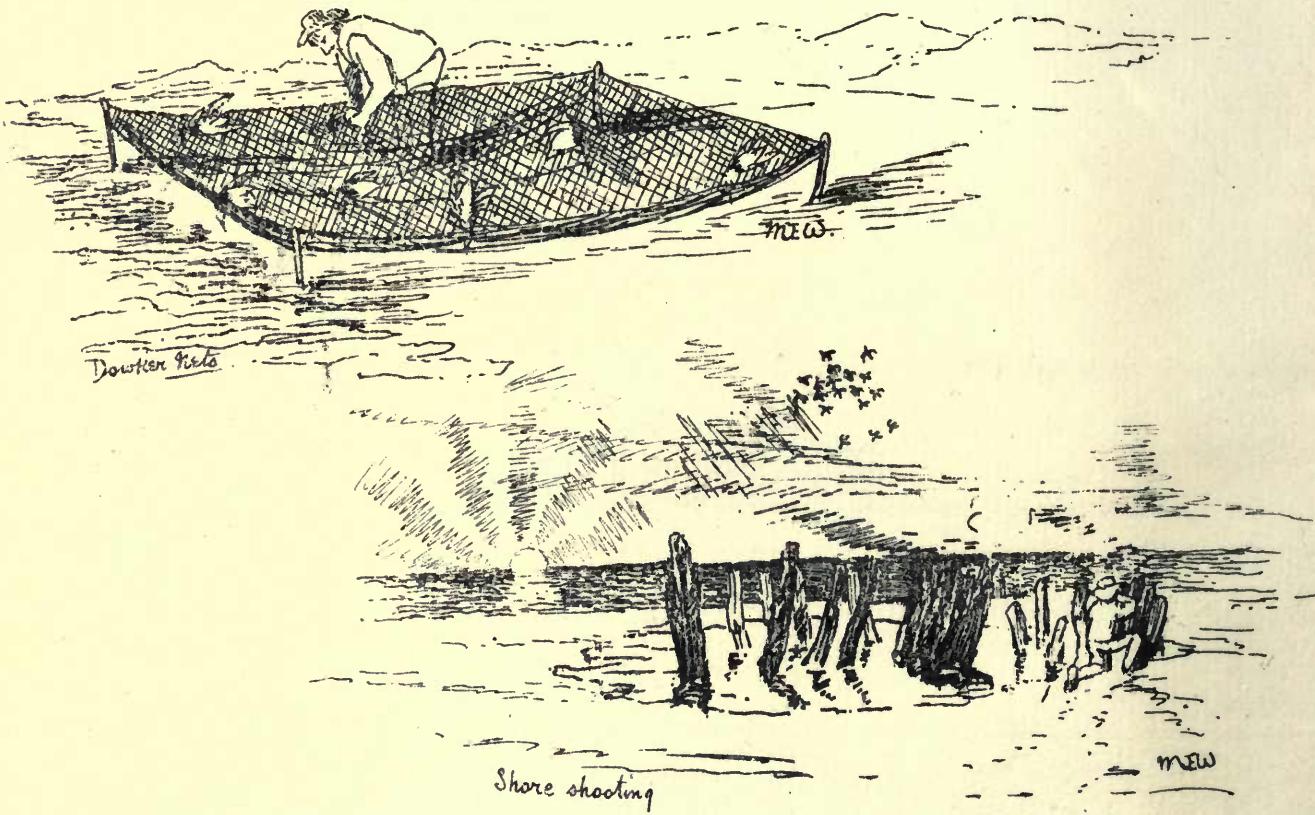
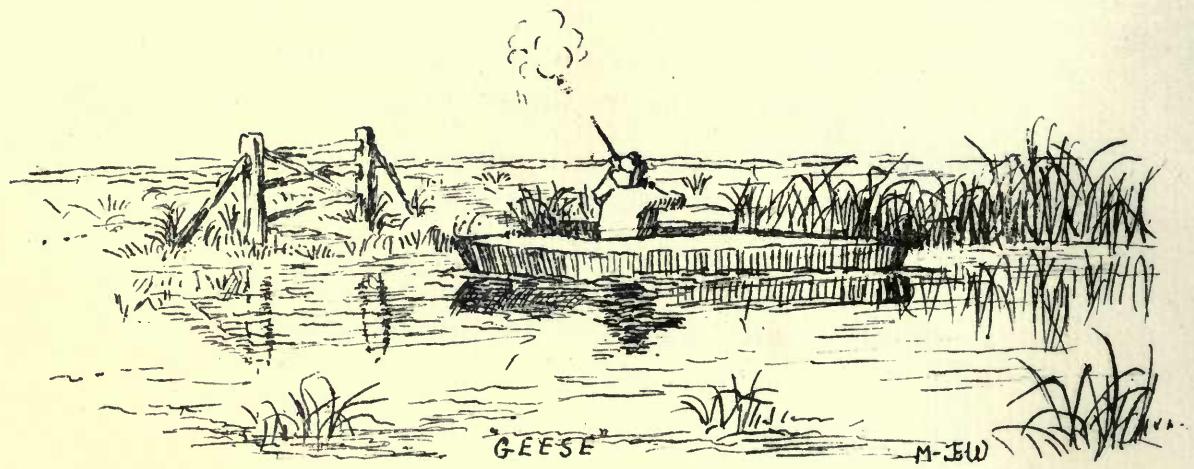
"Here! it's eleven o'clock, and what *are* you doing with that cushion in your arms on the floor there. Wake up! Wake up! They've all gone to bed and I'm just going to put the light out." It is a cheery voice that greets me, lying with a cushion squashed up in my arms, with my toes as cold as ice and the

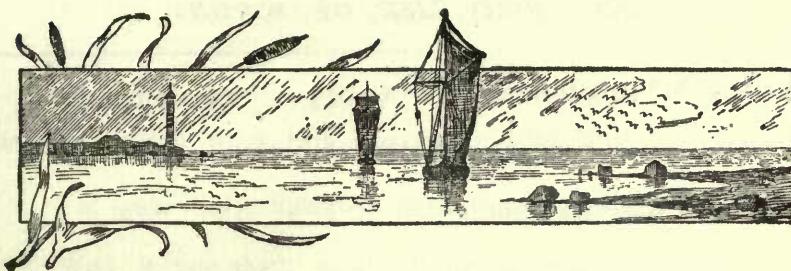
last flicker of what was originally a good fire lingering in the grate. So this is the end of my first goose tale!

Words can hardly express the delicious sense of "virtue triumphant" which I had inwardly felt over that dream of the captured goose, all to be dashed to the ground by the voice of the comforter telling me it is time for bed. When at school on a somewhat limited diet, I have often been cheated of a good dinner in my dreams by my unfortunate habit of waking up just as the first course is being served. But never have I been deprived of more genuine satisfaction than I was that winter evening when I woke up to find that my first wild goose was still at large. Jim always finishes the day with "Never mind, we'll be even with 'em yet." That comforts me.



It may interest some of my readers to know, that since this little notebook has been in the printers' hands, a wild goose has at last been bagged on Downholland Moss. It was shot on Thursday, January 12th, 1893, and was an immature specimen of the "Bean Goose." The reader can well imagine, as I stroked the bird's handsome plumage, how vividly those memories of long unsuccessful stalks, and wet crawls over swampy land came before me.





“FLEETIN.”

STROLLING along the shore one day about a week before Christmas, some four years ago now, the writer had just come within a hundred yards of the old wreck of the “*Virago*,” whose worn-out timbers still stand out boldly amidst the waste of sand, when he noticed a large flock of curlew bearing down on him. Making the best of his way through a foot or two of water up to the old wreck, he crouched down out of sight in the hope of getting a shot at the fowl. On they came in a long line, and all was ready for the shot, when he was startled by a terrible “*Boom*” from the very middle of the wreck. Five of those curlew dropped like stones into the sea, and the remainder sheered off and were soon out of shot. Almost immediately a gaunt figure stepped out into the water and set off to retrieve the curlew.

“Good evening,” I yelled out.

"'Ow do," was the reply.

"That was a good shot," I shouted.

"No so bad," he replied.

"Been here long," said I.

"Matter o' four or foive 'our," was the reply.

"Had any luck," I again inquired, as he waded back with the birds in his hand, "besides those curlew?"

"Oy, ay! A's gettin' a few."

"Let's see what you've got?" I then asked the man, whom I knew well enough in his ordinary clothes, but who greatly resembled the wild man of Borneo, in his shore shooting kit.

Meanwhile he started emptying his various pockets on to the sand, and a goodly array of wild fowl there was. Three widgeons, a shell duck, six curlews, fourteen dunlin, and a tame pigeon, which, I presume, he had shot on his way to the shore.

"Where did you get the widgeons?" I asked.

"Killed 'em by Runs o' Alt 'bout 'alf-past six this mornin'," he answered.

"And you mean to say you've been out ever since!" I inquired.

"Oh, ay!" was the answer, "and ag'in to-morrer, too."

"What time are you going?" I again asked, suddenly thinking that it wouldn't be a bad idea to go with him.

"I'm goin' 'bout half-past three fro' my cottage yonder."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll come along with you," I said.

He turned round in astonishment. "What! you're goin' to be at our 'ouse at 'alf-past three, are yer? Well I'm blessed!"

His amusement only made me all the keener to go, and I there and then set out cheerfully for home to arrange all the various little details so necessary to the success of an "out of bed" expedition of this sort. A three-and-sixpenny alarm clock was borrowed from the cook, and after a few deafening trials just to see that the machinery was in order, its finger hands were set to 3-15. Then it was propped up on an empty cigar box, for someone suggested that the noise carried better when the clock rested on a hollow stand. After I had seen a huge block of coal placed on the kitchen fire to keep it alight and a "skeleton" breakfast ready on the table, the gun and cartridges all ready in the corner, the deer stalker hanging on the knob of the scullery door, the pipe and the matches on that plate ledge there, I departed to bed somewhat earlier than usual. Myriads of ducks and widgeon, all with guns and fishing rods, shooting and landing fine fourteen-stone men, and various other nonsensical but rather terrifying sights float through my brain, and then a cloud of golden eagles come within a foot of my head and buzz at me, and buzz and more buzz, and still more

of that noisy buzzing, until it suddenly strikes me that it is that awful clock, and that it is already 3-15. I jump out of bed into the cold night air, and stuff that clock under the bed clothes, where it still continues a discordant buzzing until the machinery gives out. Meanwhile, I grope steadily round the room and hit myself in some tender spot against every projection that can possibly be, in my endeavour to find the match box. The usual scene occurs in the kitchen. All the butter is gone. The old cat is lying stretched out in the corner, which accounts for the butter. Then you can't imagine where on earth you put your cap last night. Then another hunt for the pipe and matches, and at last all is ready, and off you go into the cold night air.

Picking up the old fowler at his cottage (who is honestly astonished to see you) puffing away at the pipe of peace, the houses of Formby are soon left behind, and you strike across the fields of the Marsh Farm towards the Alt mouth. Fifty yards further, old Mat loads his gun. Twelve drachms of powder are poured down the barrel, then a big wad and a piece of the Liverpool "Echo" is rammed down on the top of it, then three ounces of big buck shot and more Liverpool "Echo," then he puts a cap on and all is ready. Old Mat's gun is almost as well-known a character as himself. It is known amongst the fishermen on the coast as "Sea-pie Samuel," on account of a prodigious shot at oyster catchers, or as they are locally called "Sea-pies," old Mat once made with it.

I never could get at the exact number he bagged with that famous shot, it varied from 17 to 264, according to the amount of drink he had in him. So we tramped on over the frosty ground while now and again a peewit would rise up close to us, then an old rat would scuttle away to the nearest dytche with Pepper, the old fowler's dog in hot pursuit.

A nice little animal is Pepper, a reddish brown mongrel of the Spaniel type, with a bit of Irish terrier showing in the hard coat. Fishermen will tell you of Pepper's cunning. Young "fleeters" who think themselves clever, always get as near old Mat as they can at flight time, for he knows more than they do, and is usually fairly well settled in the ducks' line of flight. Perhaps they have luck, and are rewarded by the thud of a good fat mallard on the ground, but when they get to the place where the duck fell it has disappeared. Old Pepper scuttled off directly she heard the shot, and that duck is safely roosting in Matty's pocket. I speak from experience, keep away from Mat if he has his dog with him. Past the deserted camp and the beach mark on the seaward side of it and so on to the wet shore. The tide is nearly full and the scene is indeed an attractive one, with the beams of the waning moon lighting up the tiny waves of the last of the incoming tide. Innumerable cries of seabirds and waders come echoing from all around us, for the water has covered the flats, and now for an hour or more the fowl will wing ceaselessly from one spot to another until their feeding grounds are bare again. Mat gets a dry

log from the piles of drift which cover the last high water mark, and walking about 50 yards from the Alt mouth he tells me to "bide theer," while he himself gets a little driftwood and settles himself down 100 yards to the northward of me. Not a sign of daybreak yet. The lighthouse, a quarter of a mile away, sends a brilliant shaft of light into the gloom, and further away to the south'ard are the twinkling lights of Liverpool and the steady glare of the "Rock."

A hoarse whistle comes echoing over the water from the "Germanic," inward bound from New York, whose bow light I can just distinguish rounding the Crosby Lightship. A flock of dunlin come past me but I leave them alone, for our shot are meant for better game, and the less shooting the better before the "flight." A few streaks of red begin to tinge the sky at last away to the east and a general "lifting" of the darkness is soon apparent. With the dawn comes the cold, and it is indeed biting sitting here in the open with nought but the shells and seaweed to protect us from the wintry zephyr (regd. phrase). Suddenly there is a quiet "rustle" in the air above me and I can just descry the forms of two mallard far out of shot, skimming with their necks outstretched to spend a quiet sleepy day on some far away sandspit. Then comes a "boom" from my companion's huge gun, and a satisfactory "flop" on the wet sand directly after is very comforting. But yet again I hear the gentle "sow, sow" of approaching fowl, and, as the birds near me, they are clearly outlined against a brilliant

streak of red in the sky. Two, four, six, eight, ten and one makes eleven widgeon, and bearing straight down on their highly excited enemy. "Bang" goes the gun and "bang" once more, and the second shot is followed by a thud close to me, and I hastily gather up the dainty bird. Not a moment too soon either, for I hear the stealthy approach of little Pepper, who has come to steal something for her master. Again my companion fires, and again I hear that satisfactory thump which denotes a duck very much out of his element. Now is a long pause; but there go some ducks and teal two hundred yards to the south'ard out of shot; then two more come over me and I miss them both in fine style.

It gets lighter and lighter, and the reflection of the thousands of lamps in Liverpool dies away from the sky. Suddenly Mat yelled "Look out, Sir," and, like a flash, over a dozen widgeon came past me very low down. I knocked one over with my first barrel and missed with the second. Then Mat rose from his uncomfortable seat and walked up towards me, but he had hardly got half way when he doubled up as if shot and quietly raised his gun. "Boom" roared out old "Seapie Sam," (very different from the genteel sound which my humble twelve bore and E.C. powder gives) and then came a welcome "flop," "flop." "Hie, fetch! good little dog," says old Mat and off rushed Pepper to retrieve the slain. She runs up to the first, sniffs at it, notices that it is as dead as a herring, so off she gallops after the other, which is just escaping into the sea.

Then we eat our humble breakfast under the lee of a bank close to the mouth of the muddy little river, with the slain laid out in front of us. Mat's score is one mallard, a beautiful old drake, and three widgeon, while mine is two widgeon. As nice a little bag as one would wish to see. Genuine wild birds obtained in a genuine sportsmanlike manner. No army of beaters to drive them over us, no "stops" to prevent them getting out the course of the guns. Overcome purely by old Mat's strategy in coming night after night and morning after morning until he has discovered the exact spot where the birds flight. Old Mat wanted to stuff all the fowl into his capacious pockets. But no, it shall not be, so we tie them up into two little bundles, and with our guns over our shoulders, march proudly through the village, just as the lazy inhabitants are coming out to sniff the fresh morning air which we have been enjoying for the last four hours. We have been many a time since then, with good luck and with bad, though the memory of my first morning's "fleetin'" will never fade away, so long as that old cock widgeon looks down upon me sadly from his case. I meet old Mat now and then, setting off in the evening to the shore, with his huge gun over his shoulder, and one of poor little Pepper's* children trotting by his side. He stops and says "When are ye comin' fleetin' ag'in." I give a vague reply. Strange. I havn't the courage to get up at 3-15 now and tramp over that well-known road to the Alt mouth.

* For obvious reasons I have altered my companion's name to "Mat," for he doesn't care about "figgerin' I print." Mat is not his real name. Poor Pepper was run over close to Altcar Rifle Range Station about two years ago and was a great loss to my friend.

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